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The Student
Young Men's Christian
Association
As it Relates to the Entire
Association Movement

J. M. Coulter



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...THE...
STUDENT MOVEMENT

AS IT RELATES TO
THE ENTIRE ASSOCIATION
MOVEMENT

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READ BEFORE THE CONFERENCE OF VOLUNTEER WORKERS IN
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It is the purpose of The Secretarial Institute and Training School of Young Men's Christian Associations to invite scholars of note and Association men of large experience and ability to make extended historical and critical studies of living Association themes and to present the results in papers or addresses upon the platform of the Conference of Volunteer Workers at Lake Geneva. Selected papers will be published from time to time by the institution as a contribution to the general investigation and discussion of themes vital to Association work.

It is believed that this institution, educational in purpose, and composed as it is of both volunteer and employed Association leaders connected with local, state and international Association bodies, is in position to furnish a platform where important questions bearing upon the Association movement can be discussed with a freedom and exhaustiveness not possible in state or international conventions. It is to be understood, however, that neither this institution nor its members necessarily endorse or are committed to the views expressed or the positions taken in these papers or addresses.

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT AS IT RELATES TO THE ENTIRE ASSOCIATION MOVEMENT.

The Young Men's Christian Association has been found to be remarkably adapted to student life. Colleges and universities are peculiar and self-centered communities, which as yet hold but little direct relation to the world at large. I do not mean that colleges and universities are not serving the world, for their influence and their usefulness are not only enormous, but increasingly so. Besides, their work is coming to touch more and more intimately the general human interests. What I mean is that the every day life of the average college and university student is related to the college and university rather than to the outside community. In consequence of this, the college community has its own peculiarly intimate associations, which are also singularly influential. Independent judgment and action may be shown by the college community in reference to the judgments and regulations of the larger community outside, but within itself, the judgment and behavior inherited from previous generations of students are tyrannical in their claims. Nowhere does precedent hold such absolute sway. In this strange community, which was first developed as a thing apart by the old conflicts between town and gown, and which to a certain degree continues to be a thing apart through force of precedent, the ordinary religious methods of the churches made but little impression. It became a notorious fact that nowhere, among intelligent people in a Christian country, was religious life at so low an ebb as among students. Our college secretaries have repeatedly given us remarkable statistics of church membership in the leading colleges and universities less than half a century ago, showing a condition of things that was appalling, and that was a menace to the future progress of Christian work. It was evident that in this particular field the usual method of church propaganda was practically a failure. The agents of this work were the members of the faculty, but a most unreasonable but none the less effective precedent, based upon the theory that faculty and students are two parties organized for mutual resistance, completely blocked such efforts. The fact that any large number of intelligent people were in practical opposition to Christianity would have called for special thought and effort on the part of Christians. The

most serious fact, however, was that this special class of college students was preparing for inevitable leadership in the larger community outside. They were to be not only leaders in position, but chiefly leaders of sentiment. Their attitude towards Christianity would have an exceedingly influential bearing upon its rate of progress; and if they should carry out into their various communities, from college or university, a confirmed habit of disregarding, or even sneering at every Christian effort, the total result of this influence would be exceedingly difficult to counteract.

It was into this situation that the Young Men's Christian Association entered. It so happened that its whole theory of work fitted exactly into the college conditions. For young men to work for one another is to utilize the most potent influence of the college community, where the words of wisdom and of authority count not at all as against the words of companionship. Not only did the Association methods thrive in the college atmosphere, but they have been peculiarly effective. In colleges the associations are more intimate, and the influence of student upon student far greater, than is possible among men outside of colleges.

For this reason, the student work has developed with amazing rapidity. By means of it the college community in general has been absolutely revolutionized within a few years, and college students are really living in an atmosphere of Christianity, rather than in one of mediæval semi-barbarism. There seems to be something peculiarly winning in Christianity to the college student, when presented in the right way; and the statistics to-day show that the body of college students, so far from containing a smaller proportion of professed Christians than any other intelligent body of people in a Christian country, contains a larger proportion.

And now the student work has swept in the colleges and universities of the old world, and we have at last a real world federation in the interest of Christian work. Not only has this work increased in extent, but it has devised method after method of laying hold of the college community, until now the old college *tripos*, consisting of Greek, Latin and Mathematics, has been replaced by a new *tripos*, consisting of the Class room, the Athletic field, and the Young Men's Christian Association.

I regard this as one of the greatest recent triumphs of Christianity, not merely because it has won for Christ a very large community peculiarly entrenched and difficult to reach, but chiefly because it has repeated the experience of Saul of Tarsus in converting a powerful influence from being a menace to Christianity to being

an aggressive advocate of it. The possibilities of Association work among students can hardly be conjectured, for its progress has been a series of surprises. It is in my mind that to the Association will eventually be committed all the religious activities of the college community. This would be logical if it is the purpose to secure results from religious activity. Further than this, many other college activities will be committed to the Association officially, as the most effective possible agent where individual service of students is concerned.

Not content with the regeneration of college communities, the spirit of trained and consecrated young manhood has demanded a place for work in the regeneration of the heathen world. This call has awakened in them almost the same insistent desire to conquer for Christ as did the various calls to the crusades in the young men of hundreds of years ago; and no one dares to predict the possibilities of this wonderful volunteer movement. It is one of the marvels of to-day, and one of the many indications that the world is to be conquered for Christ.

I am glad to make this statement as to the value, purpose and possibilities of the student movement, especially since I wish to call attention to a danger connected with it, and a consequent weakness.

The danger is, that the large and varied and peculiar activities of the student work may lead to a forgetfulness of the fact that the student department is but a part of the broader and larger Association brotherhood. This is a common tendency of specialization, which if unguarded puts a man at the bottom of his own particular well, where he imagines that his own patch of blue sky is all there is for him to see. Trained men must stand on mountain tops, where the horizon is wide, and where one's own work is seen to fall into proper relations with other work. The effects of over-specialization are nowhere more apparent than in the faculties of universities, and the ear-marks of an extreme specialist are getting to be well known. The most important is that his neglect of everything that does not pertain to his own special work is absolute and complete. Ignorance even of closely related fields is carefully cultivated, on the plea that any diversion consumes time and energy which belong to the special work. As for the world of knowledge in general, it is as foreign as though its records were written in Chinese. Certain inevitable consequences are observed. With vision focused upon some narrow field, all perspective vanishes, and a single object fills the whole horizon. This distorted vision grossly exaggerates a single subject, and there is no conception of relationship.

Such a specialist is inevitably narrow, and has shut himself off from that kind of contact with his fellows and with the world at large which would not only enable him to make his knowledge effective, but which would certainly react upon him in the way of intellectual breadth. Whenever I see such men, with only a single point of contact with the world, I am reminded of men with single senses. A man whose only contact with the world of sensation is through hearing may become wonderfully acute in the recognition of sound, with all its modifications of pitch and tone and direction; but with no contact through sight, smell, touch, taste, what strangely distorted conceptions he must get. In my own particular science, while the day of extreme specialization is still with us in ever increasing intensity, a next stage has been reached which demands that a specialist shall adjust his subject to its relations. The specialist who has no regard for the larger subject of which his own is but a part is looked upon now more as a curiosity than as a real member of the working force of his particular science.

I fear that students, surrounded by an atmosphere of specialization, are tempted to specialize narrowly in student work, to the entire neglect of the larger Association movement of which they are a part. This failure to relate oneself to the whole scheme of which he may be a part is weakness in other spheres of responsible activity, and I see no reason to believe that its result is different in the Student Department of the Association.

From my own observation, as chairman of the committee which has to do with the student work of Illinois, I think I shall venture further. This natural tendency to specialize in an atmosphere of specialization is intensified in the student work for two reasons. The first is the fact that the student field is so peculiar in many ways that it must be cultivated in ways peculiar to itself. This increases the impression that there is nothing in the Association work at large which may be of service in the student work. It may be that details are not to be suggested by the general work of the Association, but I very much doubt even this. I cannot conceive of several departments doing the same type of Christian work which are not necessarily full of suggestiveness to one another. A student, a railroad man and a clerk may belong to very different categories, and may present very different avenues of approach, but the principle of skillful approach is common to all. It is just here that very many would-be teachers fail. They seek for rules of teaching and apply them in wooden fashion; while what they need to discover is some underlying principle which may be adapted to the greatest variety of con-

ditions. As a teacher of botany, I am as likely to get valuable suggestions from a good teacher of Latin as from another teacher of botany. In the same way, a student worker is as likely to get valuable suggestions from a good railroad worker as from another student worker.

The other influence which intensifies the tendency of the student worker to specialize in narrow fashion is the attitude of student secretaries of the International Committee. I wish to speak of this very freely and frankly, for I feel that with these secretaries rests largely the responsibility of the attitude of students towards the general work of the Association. I do not believe that they are really conscious of the presence and danger of this tendency, or they would be doing something to check it. I have not been able to discover any such attempt; but on the contrary I have found much to encourage the tendency. I very seldom hear of meetings of students, arranged for in connection with general conventions, which are at all well attended. Even when they are, there is a constant tendency to divorce the student part of the proceedings from every other part. This very conference is an illustration. Here is represented city, town and railroad work, but where are the students? They had their own separate conference two weeks ago. I should have counted it a privilege to have presented both of my papers to them as well as to you. I recognize the necessity of special conferences, and perhaps my illustration from the Lake Geneva conferences is not a happy one; but I am urging that these shall not be arranged to the exclusion of general conferences, where the whole great movement of the Association shall be discussed, and each department of work may be made to feel that it is but part of a far greater whole.

I would press it upon the Student Department that it is not merely sufficient to enter into an arrangement for general conferences; but the importance of attendance at these conferences should be urged with all the zeal that marks the "working up" of a student conference. So desirable is this wider grasp upon Association work that I have often thought definite arrangement should be made by every College Association to study the history and progress of the whole Association movement. There are handbooks and there are representatives of every department of work always available; and such an education would mean grasp, and inspiration, and continuity of interest.

This unnatural divorce of the student work from the general work, and its consequent high specialization, segregates the student body from the other local interests of the Association which should

touch them. I have recognized for some time that State Committees, Metropolitan Associations and other local Associations find it difficult to be of any real service in developing the college organizations with which they are naturally associated. There seems to be no common bond of interest which can draw them together in mutual helpfulness. There can never be such a common bond except as it is developed by a knowledge of one another. My own personal observation has assured me that for some reason it is the college man who has been taught to feel that he can neither get help from the other departments of work, nor give it to them.

It is for this reason I suggest that perhaps a large measure of responsibility rests with the leaders of student work to correct this. The arrangement for the attendance of students at general conventions, for their study of Association history and movements as a whole, for their recognition of all contiguous associations of all branches as a part and parcel of their own work, to whom they are to give, and from whom they are to receive friendly service; all these things are easily provided for.

I have pointed out the danger of over-specialization in student work. It remains to call attention to the points of weakness which inevitably follow.

The first has been implied already and will be treated briefly. Too narrow specialization results in less effective men. I do not mean men who are effective in a general way, for that is self-evident; but men who are effective in their own special line. In other words, a student worker, who knows somewhat of the general Association of which his special field is a constituent part, is a more effective student worker. If this be true, a knowledge of other Association work becomes a matter of self-interest to the student worker. This result follows for several reasons. In the first place, one is always a broader man who has grasped large relationships. It gives him a greater freedom of judgment and a truer perspective than can come from a restricted survey. In the second place, a knowledge of the whole Association movement brings a sense of power. To be a part of such an all-sweeping movement inspires confidence. A man who knows the Association as a whole will never speak the word of discouragement, or regard any situation as so peculiar that it precludes successful effort. I have been amazed, time and again, by the complete ignorance of members, and even officers of college associations, of the tremendous power and dignity of the Association movement as a whole. It is as though they were citizens of some little hamlet, plodding along in lonely fashion, with no conception of the extent

and power of the great commonwealth which upholds and is ready to aid and to protect them.

In the third place, contact with the larger work brings larger contact with men of inspiration and power. To multiply such contacts is like repeatedly tapping reservoirs of energy. It is personality which inspires, and the consecration, the zeal, the confidence that are in abundant evidence at every general convention, are full of invigoration and renewed purpose to the student worker, even if not a word about student work has been uttered. In the fourth place, and even more specifically, the student worker who is a student of the whole work has at command the whole experience of a great and varied history. He sees how the work has been adapted to every possible situation and to every possible condition of men. His own problems are clearer, and his knowledge is a storehouse of suggestions as to their probable solution.

Such direct advantages to the student work in the better equipment of its workers might be multiplied, but enough has been said to indicate that any tendency toward a narrow specialization, which is indifferent to the larger movement to the point of ignorance, dwarfs rather than enlarges men for their own special work.

The second point of weakness in the student work, which comes from a failure to cultivate the broader relations of Association work, is the fact that so few college men, even the leaders of student associations, are found active and prominent in city Association work after leaving college. I would regard this as the greatest weakness of the student movement to-day, a weakness which must attract attention until some remedy has been found to abolish it. This situation is really a serious one, and indicates some grave defect in student training. The Association life in college, in the experience of any man, should be an introduction to Association life out of college. The strongest, most aggressive, and best trained men in city work should be the yearly recruits from colleges and universities. On the other hand, the indifference of college men to Association work after leaving college is to throw the weight of their influence against it. Such a result would be impossible were the college man, during his Association life in college, properly trained in the general Association movements. Knowing only college men and leaders of college work, having attended only conventions of college men, having had his attention persistently called only to the student work, it is perfectly natural for him, when his college life has ended, to think that his Association life has ended as well. Association life outside of college he knows nothing about, and his Association experience is

identified with all other college experiences, to be called up as a memory rather than as a present privilege and duty. In developing the great movement that is to train and send men to the heathen, it would be wise not to forget the development and training of men who will go into the various departments of home work as volunteer laborers. I do not see why every college Association should not be made a center for developing in its members a strong desire, born of knowledge, to take up whatever phase of Association work presents itself to them after their college experience. As was said in the outset, these men are to be leaders in their various communities, and they are in a position to do more than any other set of men in influencing public sentiment in favor of the Association.

I must confess to a great surprise when I discovered the fact that college Association men in general drop active Association connections when they leave college. I had been taking it for granted that they are prominent in the Association activities of cities and elsewhere. In fact, I have long been arguing in favor of the development of college Associations because they furnish a perennial supply of strong and leading men for the other departments of work. I have met men who appreciate fully the great work done by the other departments of the Association, but who cannot be convinced of the advantage of the organization in colleges. I have been in the habit of meeting them with the statement that it is the college work that is supplying trained and influential men for the other work. I am shocked and chagrined at the falsity of my claim. This thing cannot continue to be, because it is not natural. It is certainly contrary to what I have regarded as the natural order of things. When one remembers that college experience is but an ephemeral stage in the life of a man, to make Association contact of such a character that it is as ephemeral as the college experience is a condition of things that must not continue. I cannot argue for college Association work on any such basis.

It may be claimed that college Association men identify themselves with other forms of Christian activity when they leave college, and that their Association experience in college after all has given them a permanent stimulus to Christian work. This is undoubtedly true to a certain extent, but the large abandonment of the Young Men's Christian Association as one very effective means of Christian effort can only be explained by the fact that during the college experience no interest has been aroused in Association work in general. If college men were interested in it, they would seek it wherever they happen to be.

It is inconceivable that the larger work is not adapted to interest college men, for it is known to appeal to them strongly when properly presented. This suggests the still further weakness that not enough college men enter Association work as a profession. The importance and the dignity of such a life work has not been sufficiently presented to them; and yet there are scores of strong college men among the graduates of every year who should become identified with various departments of the Association.

My thesis, therefore, is as follows. The student movement is wonderful in its successful adaptation to the student community. Beginning with a most unpromising situation, its progress and the completeness of its conquests have been unsurpassed in the history of Christian movements. Its leaders have been men of exceptional zeal and power. Not only has it revolutionized college life and entirely changed the college atmosphere, but in its volunteer movement it has inaugurated a missionary effort which is a constant surprise in the numbers and in the consecration of the lives which are gladly offered for difficult and often dangerous service. In the midst of this great success and of this great promise for even a larger future, there is danger of neglecting a duty close at hand. This duty is to remember that all this great movement is but a constituent part of a still greater movement, all of whose parts must be bound together in common interest and loyalty. As distinct and as varied and as extensive as the student movement may ever become, it can never afford to divorce itself even in spirit from the greater movement, any more than a branch can afford to divorce itself from the vine. A constant separation of college interests from other Association interests tends to an unfortunately narrow specialization, which so far from increasing power really diminishes it. Specialization which means an increase of available knowledge is always to be encouraged, but specialization which means merely a narrowed vision is always weakness. The evidence seems clear that the student work is in danger of being so specialized, and every effort must be made to avoid it. The only effective method is for the leaders of the student movement to adopt a policy in reference to the general Association, which will in no way check their activities, but which will strengthen the student Associations themselves, and be of great service to the whole Association. This policy, briefly stated, is to urge the attendance of students upon general conventions, to impress upon them the great importance of some general knowledge of Association work, to make this knowledge available through proper literature and representative men, to train them, so far as possible, for the broader activities

of Association work, and to make it clear that beyond the few years of college experience there lie the multiform activities of the larger Association life, in which their training has fitted them to take a prominent part.

It is my belief that this policy, vigorously pressed, will speedily result in at least the following things :

1. A broader-minded, wiser, and more zealous set of men in the college associations.

2. An increased interest in college associations by students and by the friends of students.

3. A stimulus to the general activities of the Association by the annual influx of trained and influential college men as volunteer workers.

4. The presence of more college men on the professional staff of the Association.

What I am exceedingly anxious for is an increasing unification of our whole work, rather than a practical disruption through extreme specialization. Each department of work is like an organ of the body, adapted to some particular service, but none the less intimately related to all the other organs. It must not be supposed that I am deploring specialization. On the contrary, it is always an indication of great progress, and specialization in our work will become increasingly pronounced. What I desire for the Association is all the benefits and none of the dangers of specialization. We are a brotherhood, serving different constituencies, but bound intimately together in common interest and purpose. We are to shun the faintest indication of indifference to one another's work, or the slightest tendency to magnify our own at the expense of another. It is always interesting to me to hear our zealous secretaries present their own fields. To them their own facts are naturally the most important facts, and they are swept along by a tide of feeling in regard to them until they kindle within us a glow of enthusiasm. This is right, for every good thing in turn should so kindle our enthusiasm as to appear the most important. How many enthusiasms have been kindled in you by the presentation of different causes? I believe in successive enthusiasms. What I do not believe in is the single enthusiasm which distorts vision and diminishes power. My plea for the student Associations, therefore, is that they be not made up of members with a single enthusiasm, but that successive and different enthusiasms shall result in a broad and steady glow of interest in the whole Association movement.

